FRed Lowery

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

Mann, Arthur

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WHEREVER HE MAY BE
THE
ROYAL DUKE

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Horace Heidt, right, listens critically as his sensational blind whistler, Fred Lowery, rehearses a new arrangement

WHISTLING IN THE DARK

BY ARTHUR MANN

PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S BY GEORGE DE ZAYAS

Fred Lowery spent so much time whistling to keep up his courage that in the end he found himself the undisputed master of a fine musical art

WHEN Fred Lowery was only sixteen years old and struggliog to adjust himself to the fact that his dream of becomiog a concert violinist could never, never come true, somebody said, "Why not whistle?"

Lowery started whistling. In eighteen years, he has whistled himself into his present position as one of America's most successful musicians, and ioto a bank roll that would make almost aoybody whistle.

Lowery's life is as unusual as his whistling. He lost both his parents and his sight as an infant. He spent seven years io the State School for the Blind at Austin, Texas, getting an academic and musical educatioo. During summer vacations, he earned a few dollars pickiog cotton around his native Jacksonville, Texas, dreaming of the day when he would knock the world dead with his fiddling. His memory was crammed with symphonies aod sooatas, but he bad to admit he was varnished into a corner. He asked no more of life than relief from the poverty he had known as a parentless kid. He grabbed at the suggestion that he go io for serious whistliog.

Now they cheer him in night clubs and theaters aod network broadcasts as the star of the Horace Heidt orchestra. A single guest appearance on a small radio station brought 3,500 requests for his photograph. A million people have bought his whistled recording of Indian Love Call, with I Love You Truly on the other side. The rest of his records, a dozen in all, are grabbed up by fans and collectors as fast as they trickle through restricted production, but fast eoough to assure him an annual income of $5,000 for life.

Acclaimed by Musicians

Praise from musical authorities has been lavish enougb to place Lowery far above any whistler who ever puckered a lip. John Charles Tbomas was first oo the band wagon, teo years ago. Alex Templeton, the sightless piano wizard, delights io playing his accompaniments whenever possible. The concertmaster of the Mioneapolis Symphooy has called his pitch and tones "as true as any piccolo I ever heard." Fritz Kreisler honored him with a special arrangement for whistling his classic Caprice Viennois, and you have never heard anything like it.

But Lowery's favorite booster is Charles Kellogg, the original whistler of bird calls for the old Victor records. Kellogg is now retired, but hears Lowery regularly and has expressed written admiration and envy.

At present, Lowery is whistling from unmitigated joy in a comfortable house at North Hollywood, purchased outright from royalties on the Iodian Love Call record. His work with the Heidt orchestra nets him an annual $15,000. His promioent spot in the forthcoming M-G-M picture, Hold Your Hats, will be the first ever given a whistlcr. He married his childhood sweetheart three years ago and has a youngster, Scooter, properly known as Fred Maurice.

Fred Lowery's 18-year struggle was waged with all the usual tribulations that beset musical geniuses.

Once a discrimioating owner of a New York night club fired him because "people don't wanta see a blind guy whistlin' wheo they're eatio' dinner." For weeks at a stretch, he walked the streets, cold, hungry, beating oo the doors of broadcasting studios and offering to whistle long passages from almost aoy classical piece. His amazing repertoire exteoded from Bach fugues

(Continued on page 36)

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Continued from page 29

to Stravinsky's Firebird, yet he was "just another whistler."

Only a stubborn vow never to return to Texas until he had succeeded kept him feeling his way around New York for whistling jobs. Blind schools specialize in

whistle, and every guy in the place yelled Lowery. They pushed me to my feet, and so I filled the place with shrill double notes, trills and double-pitch cadenzas—all loud.

"Nicholls later told me I could make a living whistling. He said all that practice had strengthened my lips, throat and

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Continued from page 29

to Stravinsky's Firebird, yet be was "just another whistler."

Only a stubborn vow never to return to Texas until he had succeeded kept him feeling his way around New York for whistling jobs. Blind schools specialize in fortifying pupils against self-pity and discouragement. Lowery was accustomed to overcoming handicaps.

When they had track meets at the blind school, he defeated all the sprinters. They ran in lanes, marked by wires, holding a trolleylike stick that was looped over the wire at each runner's right. The stick hampered speed, but Lowery was able to run 100 yards in 10⅗ seconds. He defeated all contenders year after year in the rope-climbing event. When the school assembled the nation's blind athletes, Lowery won national honors by throwing a basketball more than 67 feet.

Training for Volume

The same fervor went into whistling. "I whistled everywhere and all the time," he says. "Even at meals between courses—between mouthfuls. And I whistled loud, because quality meant nothing. I was out strictly for volume and got it. Sometimes the fellows yelled so loud for me to shut up that I couldn't hear what I was whistling, but I kept on anyway.

"This went on year after year, and I had no idea of progress until an entertainer, Ernest Nicholls, showed up with a program of whistling and imitations. At the end of bis act, he asked if anybody could whistle, and every guy in the place yelled Lowery. They pushed me to my feet, and so I filled the place witb shrill double notes, trills and double-pitch cadenzas—all loud.

"Nicholls later told me I could make a living whistling. He said all that practice had strengthened my lips, throat and tongue—made it possible for me to whistle with relaxed lips and no puckering."

Puckering, Lowery explained, minimizes the wind content of the mouth, creating a narrow rush of air and harsh tone. The lips should be held almost normally, but firmly. When you achieve good tone at any pitch, you can start double-noting. To do this, you place the tongue as if to make a T-sound as you whistle, and permit the air to flow under the tongue as well as over it. At first, it won't work, he says, but soon there will be notes, despite the oscillating tongue, and you'll have the effect of two notes following each other.

Two different tones are achieved simultaneously by curling the tongue back slightly and holding it there as the air flows over it and under it and out through the lips. By practicing up to five hours daily, Lowery has learned to raise or lower either or both tones for striking harmonic effect. The need of ample breath has given him a chest expansion of six and a half inches.

A year after the Nicholls encouragement, Lowery was known as tbe whistling page boy of the Texas Legislature, where he served in 1930 and 1931. Then he gained an audience on station WFAA in Dallas and booked his whistling talents

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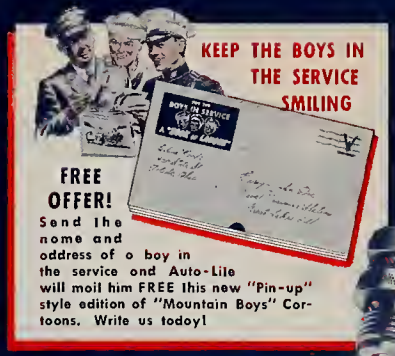

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for concerts, parties, vaudeville and anything that would return a dollar.

He reached New York City loaded with confidence and was almost killed on the busy streets. Not until a taxicab had knocked him spinning did he realize that he was following jaywalkers at crossings, because of his reluctance to let on about his eyes. He has learned how to move about in crowds, parties, hotel rooms and railroad stations without a suggestion of his handicap, and to catch names in groups in order to greet people as though he has seen them.

Ten years ago, one of the plagued officials at NBC finally rewarded his persistence with an audition and a few sustaining programs. Then came an appearance on Rudy Vallee's program, where he stopped the show with The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise. But his $120 fee didn't last long. Half of it went for overdue bills and the rest was stolen by a visitor as they talked in his room.

Soon he was back on the streets, hungry and hunting, and out came a battered traveler's check he had saved for a rainy day. But in duplicating the signature, he printed his name "Loowery" and the clerk at the bank refused to honor it. At that point, he was ready for the river, but a last-minute plea to the credit manager, Jerry Buckley, turned the tide of misfortune.

Buckley not only cashed the tattered check, but decided that the kid deserved a few breaks. Weeks later, he prevailed upon the social Clara Belle Walsh to hold a musicale at the Plaza and pack it with names. Lowery went before them with an ambitious program that began with a Chopin nocturne. A deep-voiced man was most enthusiastic, and when Buckley confided that it was John Charles Thomas, Lowery's mouth went dry.

"Mr. Buckley," he whispered, "I've hitchhiked all over East Texas to hear Mr. Thomas in concerts. He's been my idol ever since I first heard his records. But I can't whistle with him near me."

Lowery managed to finish, though, and eventually relaxed enough to whistle Home on the Range in a duet with his baritone idol.

"Aren't you thrilled?" Buckley exclaimed, as they reached the street. "Don't look scared. You should be hysterical with joy."

"But I can't," Lowery said. "Not while the hotel is hysterical over the bill for my room. I'm broke. I want to hitchhike back to Texas, but they won't give me my suitcase or my portable phonograph and my records. I . . . I haven't eaten in two days. . . ."

Buckley gulped and dug deep. "Take this," he said, pressing $150 into the boy's hand. "You can't go back to Texas now. You haven't convinced yourself and you'd always regret it. Pay your hotel bill and move to a small room uptown. I'll send you more money, and if nothing happens in three months, you can go home."

It wasn't too tough after that, because a job appeared within a month. The resourceful Clara Belle Walsh brought Lowery to Vincent Lopez, who hired him at fifty dollars a week. Lowery repaid Buckley to the penny, but that's about all the job was worth. After four and a half years with Lopez, he was still whistling choruses with the orchestra; then he was let out.

Success in One Night

Back to job-hunting he went, back to rebuff from music authorities who couldn't appreciate the beauties of his Caprice. He wrote letters to orchestra leaders and never got a reply until Horace Heidt summoned him to the Biltmore Hotel in 1938, for an audition during the supper show. Lowery rushed over, pulled out all the stops and let go with The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise. During the wild applause, Heidt shouted that he was hired. His rise to stardom began at that moment —thanks to Heidt, who recognized him as a musician everybody can understand.

"Because everybody whistles or has tried to," Heidt explains, "people envy Lowery. But everybody likes him and proof of his wide appeal is in the fact that he is the veteran of my present band. That appeal is unfailing, and so is his skill."

Heidt has been something of a Jerry Buckley to the whistler. The record companies failed to see the appeal in a whistling solo, but Heidt insisted, on an "or else" basis. Lowery's first disk carried the finale of the William Tell Overture and Listen to the Mocking Bird, and sold out. The second was rushed through with The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise and Whistle-itis. Then came a Western—Leaning on the Old Top Rail and Tumbling Tumbleweeds. These three records aggregated close to a half-million sales and astonished the hesitant record makers until the Indian Love Call disk appeared to panic the market. Fred Lowery's whistling has become big business to all concerned.

THE END

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Romance in the First Degree

Continued from page 23

"This is the real surprise. Take a look at the return address on the package."

She showed it to me. It had been written by the same hand which penned the note to Linda. It started in the usual way. It said, "Return to . . ."

The name which followed slapped me silly. It was "John Mitchell."

I looked at Sandy. I looked at the scrapbook which was almost fancy enough to be a museum piece. I compared the handwriting on the note with the handwriting on the wrapping paper. I said, "First, put the book back where you found it. Second, grab your coat and hat. Third, get set for a nice, brisk walk."

She hesitated, and I knew she was thinking about my bum foot. I said, "I can walk any distance I want. Now, scram."

While she was gone, I tried not to think. I wanted to talk it over with Sandy, and to leave my mind blank until then. She reappeared finally, wearing a cute little hat and a warm, woolly sports coat. I said, "I like you in that thing. Let's go."

We walked uptown on Fifth Avenue and then cut across to the park. Fall was pretty far advanced and there was a nice zing in the air. A few leaves still clung to the trees, but they had lost their freshness and were just being stubborn about it.

I said, "About that scrapbook: I never saw anything like it."

"That's because there never was, Jerry. It's a custom-built job."

"Why?"

She answered carefully. "Whoever had that scrapbook made was very fond of Holly Hamilton. I'm surprised the covers weren't cornered in gold and set with precious stones."

I nodded. "You see things, Sandy. I got the same impression. But, first of all, tell me something about the young lady."

"You've seen her in pictures, haven't you?"

"Of course. I know about that side. Started as a sixteen-year-old wonder with a nifty personality and an amazing voice. Clicked with her first picture and had the ability to follow it through. I've seen her play virginal, ingénue stuff . . . high-neck dresses and all that sort of thing. I knew in a vague way that she was knocking 'em dead on Broadway, but I never paid any attention to the details."

SANDY said, "You've got it pretty straight. Nowadays Hollywood stars aren't as keen about fabulous salaries as they were. Government takes most of it. So they're investing in prestige. That was probably the idea behind Holly Hamilton accepting this Broadway show. It's called Aurora and it's a must. The show is superb, and Holly Hamilton is even better. New York has gone crazy about her—as an actress and as a person."

"Tell me more," I prompted. "And try to figure how much is fact and how much is press-agent malarkey."

"That's difficult. Except, Jerry—that when a person is a phony, the truth usually creeps out, even in their publicity. There's always some smart columnist who won't ride the band wagon and who takes a delight in debunking. That hasn't happened with Holly Hamilton. She's generally regarded as being simple, friendly, unspoiled, unaffected and lovable."

"Lady, you're killing me."

"I'm telling you what I know." She stopped near a bench. She did it casually, as though she were tired. I was glad enough to sit down. Walk on a foot like mine long enough and it begins to bother. She went on, "And there's no sense being skeptical, Jerry. Until we know better, we'd be smart to accept her for what everybody says she is."

I said, "It doesn't make any difference anyway. The chances are that John Mitchell was merely an admirer who liked to keep scrapbooks."

"How old do you figure him?"

"In the early thirties, from the quick look I got."

"She is nineteen. That, I really believe. But let's concede a year. We know she's still under twenty-one. Her contract's signed by a guardian under court order."

"Where are her parents?"

"Dead. Father died when she was a baby. Her mother died when she was about eight. A man named Rufus Stirling handles her affairs."

I said, "You sure know a lot about her."

Sandy laughed apologetically. "I'm one of her fans."

I said, "John Mitchell was a relatively young man. He could have been in love with her. He might have been collecting those clippings in the beautiful binding as a future present to the young lady."

Sandy said, "How about Zora Sherman?"

"Girl friend," I explained. "She never even claimed to be anything else. But you're too young to understand such things."

"I'm not. I know all about the birds and the bees."

"Fishes are interesting, too," I said. "But it still could be the way I figure . . . or am I wrong?"

"Probably."

"You're very discouraging. Why?"

"Because of that note I snitched. I've memorized it. It doesn't check in with the picture of a sentimental, lovelorn gentleman. Clippings about Holly Hamilton—would not mean anything to anybody else in the world. So why did Mitchell say it was 'terribly important'?"

I said, "I'm going to see Zora Sherman. I'm going to try to find out what she knows about whatever connection there may have been between John Mitchell and Holly Hamilton."

Sandy thought that over for a while. "Maybe you've got something," she conceded. She got up and I followed suit. We started for home. We cut across to Madison Avenue and I stopped at a little stationery store. I bought an early edition of an afternoon paper, just in case.

THE first few pages were filled with war news. But on the fourth page I found what I was looking for. I read it once and then a second time. I whistled. I said. "It's in. They found John Mitchell's body. Sandy."

"Who found it?"

"The state police. But that isn't half."

She waited, knowing it would be good. I got hammy and built it up.

"He was killed in the Palmtree Inn," I said. "They found his body in the woods about twelve miles away from there."

Her brain was clicking. She said, "That's a good sign for Linda."

"Meaning what?"

"Linda and Alan had left there before you arrived. They were home soon enough afterward so that they couldn't have moved the body. It looks as though somebody else was in on this."

I said, "I think everybody was, except maybe Hitler and Hirohito."

"It was somebody," she said, "who

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COLLIER'S BANDEL LINN

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